

GUIDE 1:53 DOES GOD CREATE HIMSELF?

PREFACE

In Guide 1:53, Maimonides argues that attributism is foreign to Judaism, “the congregation of the true monotheists,” and therefore the Jews should resist the temptation to assign attributes to God. This is an *ad hominem* argument designed to sway his primary audience to his side. He coupled this with a second *ad hominem* argument. He claims that the attributists do not actually think through their position. They adopt it wholesale from the traditional literal reading of the scriptural divine attributes. In this, he asserts, they are “close to” (*karov l'*) the corporealists who take physical descriptions in scripture literally. While the attributists seem to rise above the gross corporealists by limiting their literalism to descriptions of divine qualities, they still make God the bearer of accidents.

At no point in his argument does he concede that the attributists’ position is philosophically respectable. Neither is their argument religiously respectable. Though his opponents, who are quite clearly Muslim theologians, portray themselves as the most consistent monotheists (Ar. *almohadin*), they compromise monotheism with their assertion that God has attributes. The Jews, as the most radically consistent monotheists, should instead uncompromisingly reject any form of attributism.

Still, despite Maimonides’ deprecations, the attributists did raise an important philosophic question. They asked what relation the simple unique divine essence could possibly have with the multifarious universe of His creation. We will give our interpretation of their response and Maimonides’ answer, and then look at Abarbanel’s different, but inspired interpretation.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER 1:53

The attributists claim a justified belief (Arabic: *itikad*, Kafih: *l’savarta*) in divine attributes, but their justification does not come from reason. It comes from literal interpretation of scripture, just like the corporealist position does. The difference is that the attributists restricted their literalism to scriptural attributions of mental dispositions. Their essential attributes are, at best, mental dispositions, all of which are qualities, which Maimonides has shown to be accidents. Since, as we saw in the last chapter, God is exalted above all qualities, He is therefore above accidents. Abarbanel frequently reminds us that accidents only affect physical entities, and God is not such an entity.

Maimonides is not now interested in all the four qualities detailed in 1:52, but only the first group of mental dispositions. This includes the class of moral qualities, like kindness or cruelty, and the class of qualities called *techne*, like the ability to be a carpenter or doctor. These are all well-settled mental dispositions.

However, the four essential attributes, i.e., life, knowledge, will, power, do not really sound like they should be included with the qualities of mental dispositions. They sound more like definitions or parts of definitions, that is to say, part of God’s essence. This is why the attributists call them essential. It is Maimonides’ argument that since they are not necessary to divine existence, they are not definitional. Put another way, the essential attributes are not essential at all, but only accidental. Since we cannot regard them as definitional, then, at best, they could only be qualities of mental dispositions, like kindness or the capacity to be a carpenter. As such, they never rise above the level of the accidents, and God is not a passive substrate bearing accidents.

Since we cannot view the four attributes as qualities of mental disposition or as definitions, there are only two other alternative accounts remaining. They are:

1) Action attributes. That is, they are human descriptions of what God does, not what He is. In our chapter, Maimonides frequently calls them relational (*hityakhasuyot*). He means that in human language we *conceive a relation* between God and the objects of His action, and describe that relationship with attributes drawn from our experience of human activity. He does not mean to say that they *are* relations, because he has already shown that there is no basis for a relationship between God and His creations. It is true that some theorists classed actions with relations, and they sometimes grouped them with qualities (as we showed in Guide 1:52). It was Maimonides' innovation to make action its own special category in his list of Affirmative Attributes.

2) Perfection attributes. When we seek to describe God's perfection, we do so using familiar human perfections. Since these human perfections would really be defects from the divine point of view, this usage is only metaphorical.

Maimonides is interested in the action attributes. He wants to show how they account for all the phenomena that the attributists seek to explain by their four essential attributes. His argument is that the multiplicity of actions does not require multiplicity in God. How does God, a single simple essence, do all these things? Maimonides provides examples from our experience. Fire melts, hardens, whitens, and blackens: each of these is opposite the other, and yet fire does all this through heat, not through a different power for each different action (but see "The Key: Abarbanel on the Action of Fire," below). The action of fire is the *phusis* type of action, that is, the natural power "to do something easily" that even non-sentient things possess. Even those non-sentient things, like fire, use one power to do many different actions. He then argues from this lesser example to greater examples. If we can show that one power accomplishes many actions also with the human intellect, then it follows that we can certainly make the same assertion with God, the most perfect of all powers. Thus, the intellect makes us weave, carve, and govern, which are all different, though the intellect is a single simple faculty. How much more must this be true of God, for through His unitary essence He performs various acts of thought, will, and power.

When someone who does not know the nature of fire conceives that fire has a whitening agent that is different from its blackening power, and a hardening capacity different from its melting property, he invests fire with his own notion of its *relationship* to its effects, all of which actually result from its single natural quality of heat. Similarly, those who conceive that God has an attribute of power through which He accomplishes creation, and an attribute of will through which He determines the nature of that creation, merely project their conceptions of His relation to his creatures back upon Him as multiple attributes. They do not understand that He accomplishes all of His work, in some incomprehensible way, through His single simple essence.

Some of the attributists (the *Asharriyah*) openly expressed their belief in divine attributes, and only disagreed over their number, which was derived from the literal terms of "some book" (*sefer msuyam*), i.e., the Qur'an, and from "a prophet" (*divrei navi*), i.e., Muhammad. Others camouflaged their concepts in obscure formulations which accommodated opposing schools of attributists. Thus the nominalists, realists and modalists were all able to say that God "has power in virtue of His essence, lives in virtue of His essence, wills in virtue of His essence" (Kafih: *yakhol l'atzmo, khai l'atzmo, rotze l'atzmo*. Schwarz: *yakhol b'tokef atzmuto, khai b'tokef atzmuto, rotze b'tokef atzmuto*). They could do this because they poured their opposing doctrines into the vague "in virtue of His essence." Thus, though one school held that the attributes were real; another held that they were only names; while another argued they were modal notions in the divine intellect, not exactly real, but not just names either. All used the same formula.

DOES THE CREATOR CREATE HIMSELF?

What drove the best of the theologians to believe that God has attributes?

Maimonides concedes that some attributists said that one power could accomplish many actions. Still, they claimed that their essential attributes were not action attributes. They could not regard life, wisdom, power and

will as action attributes. They thought these attributes were inseparable from God, and perhaps defined his divinity. Maimonides explains this, but in a manner that Salomon Munk (1803-1867), his French translator, called “truncated and obscure”:

“Those who assert the existence of the attributes do not found their opinion on the variety of God’s actions: they say it is true that one substance can be the source of various effects, but His essential attributes cannot be qualifications of His actions, *because it is impossible to imagine that the Creator created Himself*” (*l’fi sh’lo ytakhen l’khashuv ki hashem bara et atzmo*).

What did this mean? Among the commentators, Friedlander has a lucid, if all too brief, explanation (note 2, p. 189):

“The essential attributes are closely connected with the *essence*, and are opposed to attributes which are qualifications of *actions*; the arguments in favour of their existence appear to be as follows: these four attributes (life, power, wisdom, will) are inseparable from the idea of God; to think of God without them, would be the same as to think of Him without existence. Hence, if these attributes were mere qualifications of actions, *they could not have existed before the respective actions*, and the Creator would by His actions produce them, which amounts, in the opinion of those philosophers, to saying that God created Himself or His own essence.”

The problem has two parts. The first is that the argument hopelessly involves us in irrelevant temporal considerations. Since time is a quantification of motion, and motion an accident of matter, any terms such as “before” or even “create” are located in a temporal continuum and therefore mislead. The second is a more serious consideration, which is the relation of the single simple divine power to the universe of its creations: How do the many come from the One? This problem drove even the best of the Muslim theologians to believe that there must be multiple essential attributes eternally with God, to produce multiplicity. Wolfson explains (*The Philosophy of the Kalām*, 145-146):

“In God, according to them, there is an eternal power (*kudrah*) to create, as well as to do all the other things which He does in the world. This eternal power to create is also called creativeness (*halkiyyah*), and so is also His eternal power to do all the other things He does in the world similarly expressed by an appropriate abstract noun. It is because of this eternal power to create that God had been a Creator even before anything was created, that is to say God is called eternal Creator proleptically (anticipatorily). In contrast to the mere power to create which existed from eternity, the act-of-creation (*al-halk*), as well as any other act-of-doing, originates in God through that eternal power, and it subsists in God. By the act-of-creation is meant God’s utterance (*kaul*) of the word “Be” (*kun*), which is His command to anything not merely to come into existence but to come into existence according to a certain manner preconceived by God. This utterance of the word “Be,” a word which in Arabic consists of two consonants, *kāf* and *nūn*, constitutes two of the five attributes which are created in the essence of God by that eternal power of His whenever He creates a body or an accident in the world.”

We might recognize a repercussion of this last move in the first chapter of Zohar, which hypostatizes the letter *bet* in *bereshit* (“In the Beginning”) as an original creation of *Ayn Sof* after the *tzimtzum* withdrawal. This problem of the origin of multiplicity is the same problem that drove the Neoplatonists to conceive the emanation of ten hypostases from the One. Post-creation, Maimonides accepts the general idea of emanation of God’s providential sustenance of the forms in this world. He does not accept it as an explanation of creation itself. While he has no explanation of creation *ex nihilo* because no human can explain it, he does have a response to the alleged absurdity of the Creator creating Himself.

THE ACTUALITY OF THOUGHT IS LIFE

Maimonides' solution to the conundrum is to identify life, thought, and the process of self-apprehension:

“But you must know that wisdom and life in reference to God are not different from each other: for in every being that is conscious of itself, *life and wisdom are the same thing*, that is to say, if by wisdom we understand the consciousness of self. Besides, the subject and the object of that consciousness are undoubtedly identical [as regards God]: for according to our opinion, He is not composed of an element that apprehends, and another that does not apprehend; He is not like man, who is a combination of a conscious soul and an unconscious body. If, therefore, by “wisdom” we mean the faculty of *self-consciousness*, wisdom and life are one and the same thing.... There is also no doubt that power and will do not exist in God in reference to Himself: for He cannot have power or will as regards Himself: we cannot imagine such a thing.”

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12:7, 1072b:26, puts it this way:

“And life also belongs to God; for the actuality (*energeia*) of thought is life, and God is that actuality (*energeia*); and God's self-dependent actuality (*energeia*) is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God.”

Energeia is the work, operation or activity of anything. It characterizes any substance's actuality (activity) toward some end, in contrast to its mere potential to accomplish that activity. In other words, not only is life synonymous with thought (Guide 1:42), but the incessant, atemporal activity of self-apprehension constantly creates divine life by means of divine thought thinking itself. Therefore, when the theologians of the Kalām advanced the absurdity that “it is impossible to imagine that the Creator created Himself,” Maimonides answers to the contrary that this is precisely what always is happening. (See, below, “Abarbanel's Interpretation,” and my notes following it, for a completely different take on Kalām's conundrum).

The question is whether this solves the real problem of the relation of the Creator to His multiple creations. It was not a problem for Aristotle, who did not think God created the universe. For Aristotle, the universe always existed, and God relates to the universe as the cause of its motion. This is insufficient for Maimonides since he does not accept its eternality. God is not only Mover but also Creator. The great conceptual hurdle of creation *ex nihilo* is to conceive how it could have happened atemporally, since that is the only way God does anything. That mystery remains insoluble, but you do not solve it, as the attributists try to do, by multiplying entities where only one is necessary.

OBSCURE MODALIST FORMULATIONS

“God wills in virtue of His essence” or “through His essence” presents in camouflaged form the concept that God wills himself. For Maimonides this is true, but only in the sense that the divine atemporal process of self-actualization results in the divine thoughts and actions. What we imagine as His “will” is what little we perceive of His imponderable “solid-state” mechanics. Therefore, Maimonides rejects the notion of an independent attribute of will exercised by God over Himself. He says:

“There is also no doubt that power and will do not exist in God in reference to Himself: for He cannot have power or will as regards Himself: we cannot imagine such a thing.”

In addition to the other problems with the attributist formula “God wills in virtue of His essence,” there is the syntactical problem. Does God arouse or will Himself to take certain actions to punish or reward his creatures?

What is the syntactical content of that proposition? If God wills Himself, we have a sentence in trinary form, in which God is both the subject and the predicate object, and “will” is the copula. The sentence violates Maimonides’ rule against propositions of the third adjacent (Guide 1:52). Since God is single, simple, and noncomposite, there is no passive or potential “Himself” for God to act as subject upon. Or, to put it in philosophical parlance, God is always “*in actu*.” It is impossible to speak of attributes without falling into trinary language. Maimonides uses this discovery to destroy the concept of divine essential attributes.

THE ETERNAL QUR’AN?

More significantly, Maimonides has a fulcrum he can leverage against the fundamental Muslim doctrine of the divine, eternal Qur’an. This doctrine derives from Islamic acceptance of an essential attribute of wisdom, the word of God, as an independent eternal power.

There is evidence early in its history that Islam regarded the Qur’an as Judaism regards the Torah, i.e., that God *created* it. Nevertheless, early in Islamic history, the Qur’an as a divine, eternal, uncreated existence (*bilā kayfa*) became dogma. The Word of God, the Logos, is the Book, a hypostatization that Wolfson calls “inlibration” (compare “incarnation,” and see Wolfson’s fascinating discussion of the two terms: *Philosophy of the Kalām*, 244-248). This came about after early contacts with Christians. It may have been a repercussion of their Trinitarian idea of the eternal “son.”

Some theologians of the Kalām were aware of Maimonides’ arguments, yet had to find some way to save the uncreated Qur’an as the attribute of wisdom. Thus, they employed modalism, in which the attributes “exist” but as concepts in divine thought. They used the formula, “God wills by (or ‘through’ or ‘in virtue of’) His essence,” by which they meant that God exercises the conception of will as regards Himself, but that attribute of will was neither a real existence nor a mere name. The problem is that any such modality in the mind of God must always be actual and real: nothing is potential or merely conceptual in God.

Still, in and of itself, the formula does not sound offensive. It can also mean that the will is merely another name for God Himself, when we conceive the relationship of God and His creatures. In this understanding (Narboni, Shem Tov) God alone creates the diverse things, “through His essence,” which means that He creates them by Himself, without attributes. Nonetheless, Maimonides recognized that this formula had become the last refuge of the attributists. He castigates the modalists among them for dishonestly denying Divine composition (Arabic: *‘shirk’*, Hebrew: *‘shituf’*) while yet maintaining the existence of modal essential attributes: “For in not admitting the *term* ‘compound’ they do not reject the *idea* of a compound when they admit a substance with attributes.” Maimonides would prefer to say “God wills but *not* through His essence” to force us to focus on the actions, and to leave no space for a separate Logos.

GOD’S MODAL RELATIONS WITH HIMSELF AND WITH OTHERS

Can God know Himself, will Himself or create Himself? That would not be possible. I have to will myself to act, but God does not have a passive ‘Himself’ that is willed. Knowledge in God is no different from existence. Indeed, his existence is self-knowledge. There is no differentiation in His essence for it is always *in actu*.

The modalists could verbally assent to this but still reply that His will, power, and so on are existents *in relation to His creatures*: “They, however, do not speak of wisdom in this sense, but of His power to apprehend His creatures.” Thus, they said that He has wisdom in relation to the creatures. Maimonides replies this is the same as saying that fire had the attribute of blackening in relation to some objects, and bleaching in relation to others. But then fire would have two different opposite attributes, when we instead know that these different things are results of the quality of heat. Moreover, *relation* implies a similar *fundamentum* between the *relata*, but there is

no *fundamentum* between God and His creatures by which we could say that one is equal to, greater or less than the other, or in which each is dependent upon the other (Guide 1:52).

Maimonides' argument is devastating. It may not have been clear on reading the chapter that his object is the Kalām and its Hebrew followers, but he carefully drops broad hints to that effect. He says that the various theologians develop their different numbers of essential attributes (from four to seven) based on passages from “a prophet” and “some book,” referring obliquely but dismissively to the Qur’an and Muhammad (cf. note 25 in Kafih; note 3, p. 189, Friedlander). By contrast, the “congregation of true monotheists” that is, the Jews, should not, according to Maimonides, unilaterally disarm themselves by succumbing to attributism, since the argument against it is their most effective weapon in debates with Islam. (For the “congregation of true monotheists,” Kafih translates *kahal ha’myakhadim be’emet*: the Arabic original for *ha’myakhadim*, is, significantly, *almohadin*, the name taken by the people who conquered the Andalusia of Maimonides’ youth).

ABARBANEL’S INTERPRETATION

The crux of our chapter is the following “truncated and obscure” statement of Maimonides:

“There still remains one difficulty which led them to that error, and which I am now going to mention. Those who assert the existence of the attributes do not found their opinion on the variety of God's actions: they say it is true that one substance can be the source of various effects, but His essential attributes cannot be qualifications of His actions, *because it is impossible to imagine that the Creator created Himself*. They vary with regard to the so-called essential attributes—I mean as regards their number—according to the text of the Scripture which each of them follows. I will enumerate those on which all agree, and the knowledge of which they believe that they have derived from reasoning, not from some words of the Prophets, namely, the following four: —life, power, wisdom, and will. They believe that these are four different things, and such perfections as cannot possibly be absent from the Creator, and that these cannot be qualifications of His actions. This is their opinion. But you must know that wisdom and life in reference to God are not different from each other: for in every being that is conscious of itself, life and wisdom are the same thing, that is to say, if by wisdom we understand the consciousness of self. Besides, the subject and the object of that consciousness are undoubtedly identical [as regards God]: for according to our opinion, He is not composed of an element that apprehends, and another that does not apprehend; He is not like man, who is a combination of a conscious soul and an unconscious body. If, therefore, by ‘wisdom’ we mean the faculty of self-consciousness, wisdom and life are one and the same thing. They, however, do not speak of wisdom in this sense, but of His power to apprehend His creatures. *There is also no doubt that power and will do not exist in God in reference to Himself: for He cannot have power or will as regards Himself: we cannot imagine such a thing.*”

The interpretation that I gave for this passage follows Wolfson, Friedlander and Even-Shmuel, and is probably the most common way of grasping Maimonides. What was the subject of “*it is impossible to imagine that the Creator created Himself*”? The underlying premise of my interpretation was that the Kalām thought that the subject of the conundrum was an essential attribute, not an action attribute; that it was either “life,” “power,” or, perhaps, “creativity” (*borei*) taken as a necessary partner of God.

Abarbanel, followed by Michael Schwarz (*ad loc.*, note 24), takes a completely different approach, using a different system and starting from different premises. Nonetheless, it has merit, and opens up the text usefully. He starts from the fundamental premise that the subject of the conundrum is the attribute “Creator,” but argues that the Kalām does *not* take it as an essential attribute.

Abarbanel focuses on the word “The Creator,” *borei*, in “because it is impossible to imagine that the *Creator created Himself*.” One of the attributes of God is His aspect as Creator: but what kind of attribute was it?

When I reflected on the possibility that the subject was *borei*, I understood the conundrum to be an *argumentum ad absurdum* attacking Maimonides' view that *borei* is an action attribute. This was not one of the four essential attributes that Maimonides consistently recites in our chapter (life, wisdom, will, power), but I relied on his statement that "They vary with regard to the so-called essential attributes—I mean as regards their number—according to the text of the Scripture which each of them follows," to support a Kalām view of *borei* as an additional essential attribute. Wolfson also understood that the Kalām made *borei* an essential eternal attribute (*halkiyyah*) with God. The Kalām's argument, then, would be that if *borei* were an action attribute, not a static essential attribute, and since God created everything, then it must follow that God would have created Himself. Since this seems absurd, *borei* must be an essential attribute, not an action attribute.

Abarbanel proceeded in precisely the opposite fashion.

Abarbanel looks at *borei* and sees that it is not in the list of four attributes, and so he assumes that the attributists concurred that it was an action attribute. This was possible, because, from the standpoint of creation *ex nihilo*, where scripture uses a variant of *borei* for the initial creation (*bereshit bara elokim*, "In the beginning God created"), *borei* is not eternal instrumentality, but expresses a particular divine action. In other words, *borei* is not a tool God uses to create the universe; rather, it is a term that expresses this action or this action-relation.

So when Maimonides says, "Those who assert the existence of the attributes do not found their opinion on the variety of God's actions: they say it is true that one substance can be the source of various effects," he means that the attributists accepted Maimonides' claim that one willing entity causes different actions, since they agreed that this was what happened when God created this manifold universe. They would even go further to argue that *borei* had to be an action attribute rather than an essential attribute, since if *borei* was one of the essential attributes with God when He created the "all," then He himself would have been subject to it. But it is absurd to consider that God had created Himself.

Nonetheless, the Kalām retained the four attributes that they considered essential. The attributists believed that life, wisdom, will and power were *attributes of repose* (Even-Shmuel's formulation: *taarei menukha*), and that they were "such perfections as cannot possibly be absent from the Creator, and these cannot be qualifications of His actions."

For Abarbanel, then, the issue is joined. Maimonides proceeds to use the same argument from absurdity that the attributists had just used to disqualify *borei* as an essential attribute to demolish will and power, *ratzon* and *yakhol*, as essential attributes. He says, "There is also no doubt that power and will do not exist in God in reference to Himself: for *He cannot have power or will as regards Himself: we cannot imagine such a thing*" (Friedlander translation). Pines' translation shows the force of the remark better: "Similarly, without any doubt, neither power nor will exists in and belongs to the *Creator (borei; Jud.Ar.: ללבארי)* in respect to his own essence; for He does not exercise His *power* on His own essence, nor can it be predicated of Him that He *wills* his own essence. And nobody represents this to himself." Italics are mine. Discounting Pines' usual prolixity, notice that Maimonides uses the term *borei* here instead of one of his usual words for God, to express his intent to class *ratzon* and *yakhol* with *borei* as action attributes. By adapting the formula to apply to the attributes of will and power, that it is impossible to imagine that the *borei* willed Himself or had power over Himself, Maimonides uses the attributists' method against them. *Will* and *power* are attributes that express other-directed actions. As we perceive the effects, we foolishly project them back upon God as essential powers with Him.

He could do the same for wisdom/intellect, for ever since Aristotle, philosophers regarded intelligence as an activity. The problem is *life*. Life seems to be the perfect example of an attribute of repose. It is impossible to imagine God without it. Maimonides' wonderful solution is to make life dependent on wisdom, through the ongoing activity of divine self-consciousness.

In all of this, Abarbanel teases out a non-explicit Maimonidean commitment to the proposition that values are not equal. By arraying the four essential attributes together, the attributists seem to weigh them equally. But what emerges is that wisdom is more important than the other three. Maimonides reveals this when he recognizes the value of self-consciousness, reminding us that philosophers regarded God as thought thinking itself.

“...for in every being that is conscious of itself, life and wisdom are the same thing, that is to say, if by wisdom we understand the consciousness of self. Besides, the subject and the object of that consciousness are undoubtedly identical [as regards God]: for according to our opinion, He is not composed of an element that apprehends, and another that does not apprehend; He is not like man, who is a combination of a conscious soul and an unconscious body. If, therefore, by ‘wisdom’ we mean the faculty of self-consciousness, wisdom and life are one and the same thing.”

In other words, in God, life is the product of the activity of consciousness. As such, *life* is an action, perhaps even a reaction, but not an essence defining God. In showing that life is subsumed in the action of intelligence, Maimonides demolishes the last remaining essential attribute.

THE KEY: ABARBANEL ON THE ACTION OF FIRE

Abarbanel may have come to his conclusions because he recognized an apparent contradiction earlier in the chapter, the example of the action of fire. I think that this contradiction throws light on Maimonides’ wonderful insight that life depends on consciousness.

Maimonides says:

“Fire melts certain things and makes others hard, it boils and burns, it bleaches and blackens. If we described the fire as bleaching, blackening, burning, boiling, hardening and melting, we should be correct, and yet he who does not know the nature of fire, would think that it included six different elements, one by which it blackens, another by which it bleaches, a third by which it boils, a fourth by which it consumes, a fifth by which it melts, a sixth by which it hardens things—actions which are opposed to one another, and of which each has its peculiar property. He, however, who knows the nature of fire, will know that by virtue of one quality in action, namely, by *heat*, it produces all these effects.”

Abarbanel knew that this was not the position taken by the scientific tradition. Aristotle (*Generation and Corruption*, 2:4:331A19, *Sense and Sensibility*, 4:441b10) holds that the different and contradictory actions of fire come from *two* elements, heat and dryness (Saadia agrees, *Emunot v’Deot*, Rosenblatt ed. 177, 237; Landauer ed. 143, 190). In fact, Maimonides knows this and repeats it in Guide 2:22, quoting a paraphrase of Aristotle. The issue arose, he explained there, because:

“Aristotle and all philosophers assume as an axiom that a simple element can only produce one simple thing, whilst a compound can produce as many things as it contains simple elements; e.g., fire combines in itself *two* properties, heat and dryness: it gives heat by the one property, and produces dryness by the other: an object composed of matter and form produces certain things on account of its matter, and others on account of its form, if [both matter and form] consist of several elements. In accordance with this axiom, Aristotle holds that the direct emanation from God must be one simple Intelligence, and nothing else.” (He makes Aristotle into Avicenna here, based on whichever paraphrase of Aristotle he had access to.)

This really goes to the heart of what Maimonides says is the problem he intended to solve in this chapter, which is whether anything other than what is one and simple can come from something which is one and simple. Since Aristotle never accepted creation *ex nihilo* it is no problem for him. He does not need a creator at all, only an

unmoved mover. But to the neo-Platonized Aristotelians of Andalusia, it was a very large problem, and they looked to Avicenna's solution which involved a system of ten emanated hypostases beginning with just one simple intelligence (which Maimonides explains in Guide 2:22). Maimonides' simpler solution was to agree that from one thing one thing comes, but that the universe as a whole is just that one thing, "Know that this Universe, in its entirety, is nothing else but one individual being" (Guide 1:72).

Returning to the action of fire, note that Maimonides had just said in the name of Aristotle that "a simple element can only produce one simple thing" but then brings the contrasting example of fire as a compound of the forces of heat and dryness. But he knew it was one of the four simple elements. Considering these apparent contradictions between whether fire acts with one action of heat or two actions including dryness, and whether it is an element or a compound, Abarbanel tells us what he takes to be Maimonides' solution. Dryness, he says, comes from heat: Heat is the action, dryness is the *reaction* to excessive heat, *ki hinei ha-khom hu ha-eikhot ha-poel, v'ain ha-yovesh poel, ki im mitpael...ki ha-yovesh b'esh yimshakh m'ha-khom*. This is just like the way in which life is produced by self-consciousness. The apparent contradiction between Maimonides' two accounts of the elements of fire's action should have presaged his unification of life and wisdom at the high level of the essential attributes. Or, to put it the other way, his solution of the problem of the essential attributes throws light on the apparent contradiction of his two accounts of the action of fire. Especially since fire in its aspect of light represents wisdom. Just as intellect produced life through the action of self-consciousness, so heat produced dryness through the action of fire. Fire is not like the compound material causes because it is one of the four elements. Fire seems to share an elemental simplicity with God, and, rather like God, accomplishes many things thru one single force.

The obvious result is that the attributes are not equal. Life is not the equal of wisdom, since mind precedes being, i.e., essence precedes existence. Maimonides is no existentialist (i.e., he does not believe that existence precedes essence), nor does he hold that all values are equal.

FROM ONE SINGLE SIMPLE THING ONLY ONE THING COMES?

Abarbanel proceeds to address the origin of multiplicity. While God through His unitary essence does do many things, which we recognize under the aspect of the four attributes, that is only after creation. After creation, these forces act on objects that are prepared to receive that action (*mekablim*). However, in His aspect as Creator, *borei*, there are as yet no such recipients. Matter had not come into existence, either in its gross form that we encounter, or in its ultimate hylic state of pure potentiality. The difference between creation and formation is that the Creator had nothing to work on before creation. The Creation is the unconditioned act of the One creating the single universe, which Maimonides recognizes as a single sentient being.

However, at this point, Abarbanel explains, we are not yet ready to address whether the universe is created or eternal. Any answer that Maimonides gives in the first section of the Guide must assume both possibilities. He addresses this in the second section of the Guide. The question, then, is whether Maimonides can show that the emergence of multiplicity is possible, even under Aristotle's assumption that the universe is eternal and uncreated.

Maimonides, in Guide 2:18, shows how incorporeal power works differently from fire and other physical forces:

"...it is not impossible that such a being acts at one time and does not act at another. This does not imply a change in the incorporeal being itself nor a transition from potentiality to actuality. The Active Intellect may be taken as an illustration. According to Aristotle and his school, the Active Intellect, an incorporeal being, acts at one time and does not act at another, as has been shown by Abu-nasr (Al-Farabi) in his treatise on the Intellect. He says there quite correctly as follows: 'It is an evident fact that the Active Intellect does not act continually, but only at times.' And yet he does not say that the Active

Intellect is changeable, or passes from a state of potentiality to that of actuality, *although it produces at one time something which it has not produced before*. For there is no relation or comparison whatever between corporeal and incorporeal beings, neither in the moment of action nor in that of inaction. It is only by homonymity that the term ‘action’ is used in reference to the forms residing in bodies, and also in reference to absolutely spiritual beings.”

The intermittent action of the active intellect can produce many things, because “it produces at one time something which it has not produced before.” Maimonides’ purpose in 2:18 was to explain how creation could occur after a period of inaction, but now Abarbanel takes this notion to explain the production of different things from one simple thing after creation. Intermittent action does not imply alteration or composition. Maimonides claims that the intermittent action of the active intellect is the fault of the intended recipients of that action. God, or the active intellect, emanates form into matter, but no formation can take place unless the matter is prepared to receive its appropriate form:

“...it is not due to anything contained in the Active Intellect itself, but to the absence of substances sufficiently prepared for its action, that at times it does not act: it does act always when substances sufficiently prepared are present, and, when the action does not continue, it is owing to the absence of substance sufficiently prepared, and not to any change in the Intellect.”

Moreover, in 2:22, he quotes an Aristotle paraphrase, which may show that even for Aristotle a single simple willful actor can indeed perform different actions. This willful ensouled actor is not like an unsouled natural force, which does diverse things because it is compound:

“Aristotle and all philosophers assume as an axiom that a simple element can only produce one simple thing, whilst a compound can produce as many things as it contains simple elements....[but] A third axiom is this: A single agent that acts with design and will, and not merely by the force of the laws of Nature, can produce different objects.” (Maimonides’ language is tricky, it may well be that he is reading this into Aristotle, but this analysis will have to come later)

Abarbanel takes this “third axiom” to mean that the single willful actor can produce many effects irrespective of the state of the recipients! (*v’sh’ha-poel b’ratzon im hioto aleph kavah yipal paoolot mitkhalafot b’avur ritzono lo mifat ha-mekablim*). This shows that God, even before the beginning, even before the existence of hyle, through His simple essence, wills the production of many things (*u’mizei ha-tzad b’tehilat ha-bria b’hiot ha-poel v’ha-borei yitborakh ekhad pashut m’kol tzad, u’mbilti hiot she’mah mekabel klal hayu hapaoolot rabot u’mitkhalafot k’fi ritzono v’yakhulato she’hem atzmo*).

The intermittent emanatory action of the active intellect only explains multiplicity in creation after the creation of hyleic matter. This remains important, because Maimonides is committed to the concept of the continual action, post-creation, of emanatory *formation*. In this way, one does produce many. But this is not the same as divine action prior to the creation of matter. At the level of *creation*, what Abarbanel identifies as the crux of our chapter is Maimonides’ assertion of God’s unconditioned ability to produce diversity *ex nihilo* and *de novo*. This position adds to and presents a deeper understanding of his statement in 1:72 that the universe is one organic being, a single *complex* thing created by the One.

The example of fire, then, seemed to portray apparent multiplicity in the actor, for though we had good reason to think that the nature of fire’s elemental action was a complex of two forces, we learned that it is actually simple: the action of heat alone. All the more so for the intellect, since its self-conscious activity creates life, together with many new and intermittently emanated things, all dependent on the existence of a material recipient. All the more so and so much more so in the case of the Actor who, entirely and undividedly willing, doing, thinking and living, creates diversity from nothing.

But we will never know how.

* * *

As justification for the difference between my interpretation and Abarbanel's, the reader should understand that the Kalām's grasp of the essential attributes was by no means monolithic. The theologians counted the attributes differently, and, as Wolfson showed, some of them added "creativity," *halkiyyah*, to the list. It may be true that those who kept the list down to the four usual suspects may have, as Abarbanel thinks, advanced the *argumentum ad absurdum* to show that *halkiyyah* should not be added to the list, and that they considered it only an action attribute. Whether you follow my interpretation or Abarbanel's, it seems clear that Maimonides saw nothing absurd in saying that God creates Himself, and that He does so continually.

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